

ASIFA EAST

The International Animated Film Society

ANIMATOR

APRIL 2003 Issue

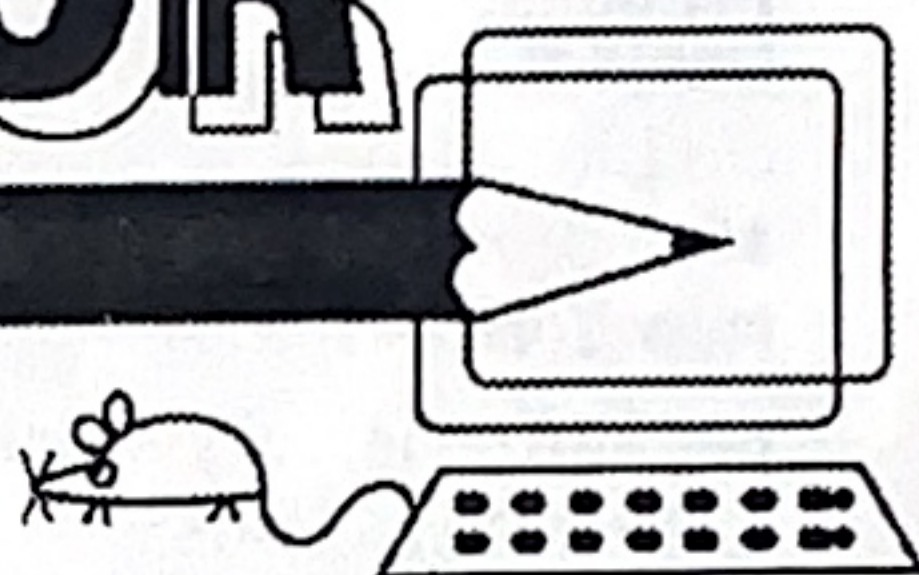
ASIFA EAST PRESENTS:

**An Evening with
SNL's Robert Smigel**

Monday April 21st, 6:30 PM.

SVA 209 E 23rd St.

Room 502 (fifth floor)



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* Michael
Sporn on
Oscars 2003

* Richard
Gorey, Jr. on
MTV'S CLONE
HIGH

* Trevor
Woolley on
ANIMATRIX &
COWBOY
BEBOP

* Handy Asifa-
east renewal/
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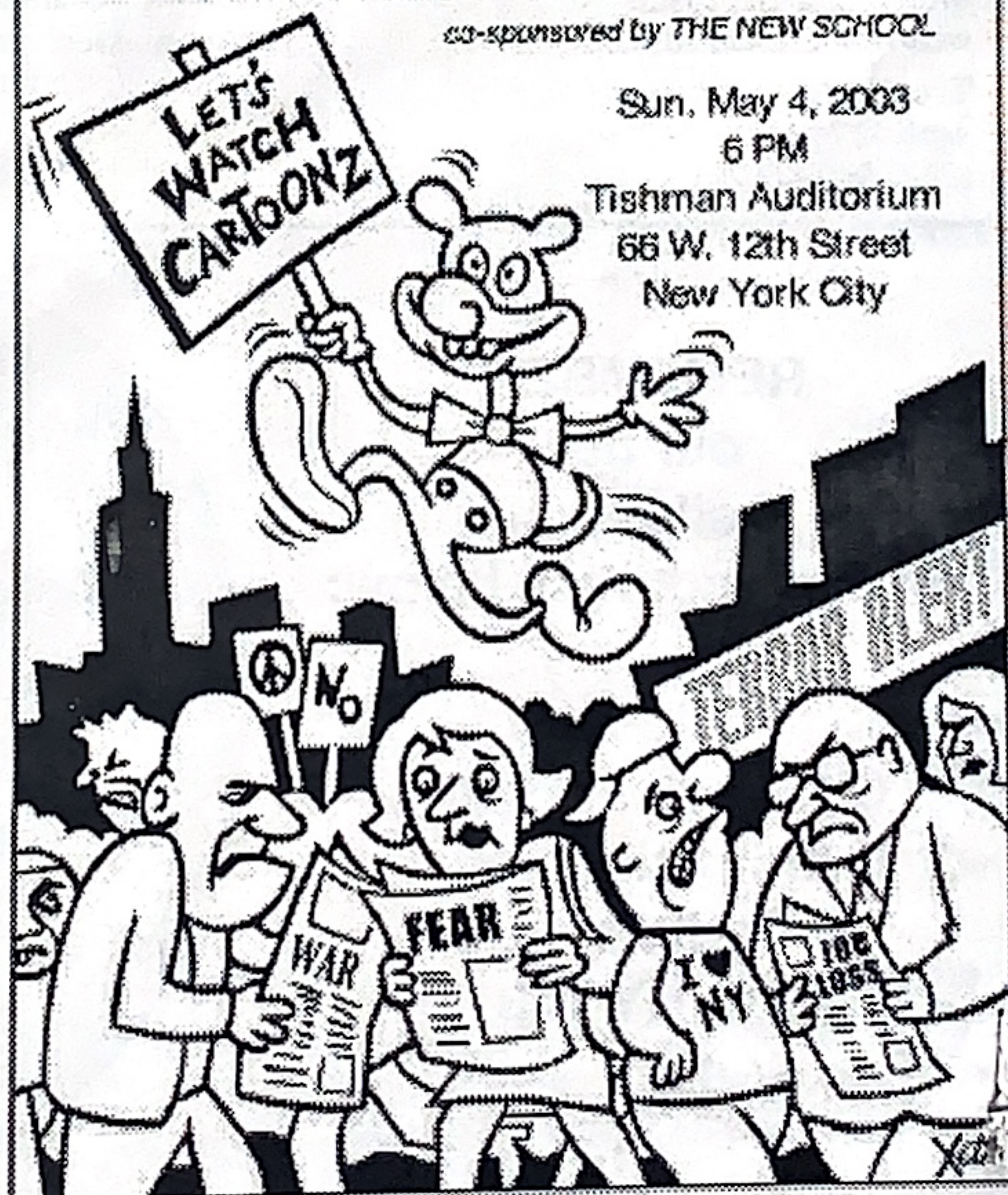
* and much,
much more!

34th ASIFA-EAST ANIMATION FESTIVAL

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Sun, May 4, 2003
6 PM

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ASIFA East

The International Animated Film
Society Northeast / New York Chapter
A Program of the New York Foundation For The Arts

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LETTER FROM
THE PRESIDENT
DAVID B. LEVY



Indies for Dummies

I've noticed a trend. Most folks that make indie animated films do so because it's in their system. Chances are they start experimenting with animation early in life, before film/art school. These are the filmmakers that were making films (or something quite like films) before there was a grade attached to it. It's easy to see how these folks go on to make their own indie productions in their post-school years.

To be fair, not everyone has the aspiration to be a filmmaker and some that do should probably spend their energies elsewhere. There are many good and obvious reasons to make your own films. For one, having that extra creative outlet allows one to put the commercial work they do in perspective. You might be less likely to explode the next time you get constructive criticism on the job if you know you're going home at 6 o'clock to put on your filmmaker's cap. Doing so goes a long way to helping one establish an individual identity in the field and because films travel faster and cheaper than you can, your film can be seen all around the world. While you're home watching Barney Miller in your pajamas, your film could be opening a door for you in a far corner of the globe.

After talking to many independent filmmakers over the years and going through the struggles myself, I thought I'd round up some helpful hints that might give you a leg-up in sticking with a project and making it as smartly as you can. The list below focuses mostly on the rigors of making a narrative film, but I think much of this would still be applicable to experimental work. Send all angry responses to me at david.levy@nick.com Enjoy!

A) Work smart!

If you've got a traditional narrative film, do an outline, thumbnail sketches, a board, an animatic...in short: follow a production process. As you move forward to the meat of the project, employ studio techniques in numbering your drawings, scene folders etc. One studio practice you shouldn't automatically do is split your characters into multiple cell levels. If this is the look you want, then go for it. This limited animation style was designed to move through production as cheaply and quickly as possible. While that's a plus, you may also be giving up acting opportunities that fuller animation provides. Know what choice you are making and why.

B) Make your project do-able!

When I was in SVA there was a fellow student that was going to make the Citizen Kane of animation. He was going to get smoke bombs and fire under an oxberry to help pull off the realism needed for his 20-minute opus. All of this before he knew how to animate a bouncing ball. Guess what? The film was

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never made and the student vanished from the Animation Department altogether. Keep your project manageable (the longer your project will take you, the less likely it is that you will be able to see it through). Life has a way of throwing up obstacles. So, as Frankenstein's monster might say, "short....goooooooood".

C) Know when to say "when"!

Remember when that dog kept offering Chilly Willy the Penguin "more butter...more syrup" on his pancakes? Well, Chilly didn't know when to say "when". But you can. Since, ultimately, you're the one you're trying to please, you must also be the voice of reason and be able to move on after completing something. You could work on something or some stage forever, so set your standard or goal for a particular phase and recognize when you've reached it.

D) Utilize the "natural improvement curve" when working.

Unless you are Michaelangelo, chances are, you will have room for improvement and will get better as you go. So, avoid the trap of having to redo all your previous work by skipping around. Don't work start to finish. Do this all through production (even in stages like inking or creating backgrounds). You will end up with a much more unified piece.

E) Work with collaborators to complement your strengths, or more importantly, make up for your weaknesses. Just because you can do everything yourself doesn't necessarily mean that to do so would be best for your production. Plus, you will find that you will push yourself further if you have others involved that you are trying to please or support. Definitely, seek out help when it comes to voice talent. I can do as many funny voices as the next guy, but that doesn't make me an actor. When you animate to a voice track you get lots of ideas from the actor who read the dialogue. Remember that you can't hang a good performance on a bad track.

F) Show your work to a circle of friends at every key stage.

Make sure these friends are professionals that you respect, not your family cat or your hairstylist. Your "circle of friends" will have a fresh eye that only distance can ensure. Chances are they can find areas that you may have taken for granted in being so close to your project. However, not everything you hear will be useful to you or in the direction you want to go. Don't forget that you're still making your film. You don't want to end up with a film made by committee.

G) Use the "little elves" technique.

I think many projects get abandoned after one realizes the huge amount of work required to complete a film. It can be very daunting. However, if you whittle away at it for a few hours, a few nights a week, you'll be surprised

by how much you can get done. I call it the little elves technique because the next day, when you look at what you did the night before, it feels like little elves must have accomplished it in the middle of the night. If real little elves actually show up in your apartment, contact an exterminator right away.

H) Do a test run of your specs to finish your film early on!

Don't go too far in the finishing of your animation drawings until you do a small test. Ink a small scene and take it all the way through color and, if you're going digital, composite with a final background. Make careful note of what works and doesn't work.

I) Don't listen to hoopla from people who tell you, "you could do your film faster in another program". Do what works for you. While there are time savers around, animation is, by its very nature a tedious and time consuming thing. Exploring software or programs takes time (not to mention the expense). That may be a venture best undertaken when you're between projects....then, why not start a project to test your new software skills?

J) Work with or at least show your final cut to an editor before calling your film finished. This is your last chance to get an objective and trained eye on your work in key areas like continuity, screen direction, pacing etc. You're going to have to live with this film for the rest of your life, unless you're George Lucas. Speaking of Mr. Lucas, avoid the trap of wanting to go back and redo/revise your earlier works (student or otherwise). Your older works represent where you were at the time and there's nothing wrong with that. Now you are in a different place as a human being and a filmmaker. You have much more to gain by doing something new.

K) Collaborate with a composer/sound designer

Usually you will benefit greatly by working with a pro to compose a score specially made for your film. Go to any animation festival and after a while you'll experience a feeling of disconnectedness watching the films on the screen. I suspect that occurs because a lot of filmmakers use public domain/library music in their films. So much of the pathos, humor, storytelling and drama will only come out with the correct score.

L) Exploit all your connections and cash in old favors.

In big Hollywood moviemaking, no one spends their own money. Our indie equivalent to that would be to develop mutually beneficial relationships with other craftspeople that can work with you for free or at a low cost. Hey, you'll help them out one day too, right? Hello? Is there anybody out there?

M) Fully push and promote the finished product!

You didn't go through all of the above just to have an expensive paper weight. Seek out a film distributor or contact TV stations that air independent animation. Enter festivals! Set up appointments and show your film around.

Oscar Gold and the Machine by Michael Sporn



SPIRITED AWAY won the Oscar as Best Animated Feature for the year. This is a testament to an individual's work. THE CHUBB CHUBBS won the Oscar as Best Animated Short. This is a testament to a machine pressed bit of 3D graphics with no hint of a soul.

The question is how can the Academy get it so right in one case, and so wrong in the other? The answer seems obvious and simple: PR. Press for both films has been enormous.

In the case of SPIRITED AWAY, the film was selected by ALL of the critics in the US for positive reviews. It was a film on the list of every notable critic as one of the best films of the year (not best animated films, but best films period). Even those Academy members who hadn't seen the film would have felt cowed into voting for it just by reading the ads in Variety which told us how honored it was. Oddly, when the film was initially released, Disney – its distributor – gave it little to no advertising. More money was spent on the film in its race for the Oscar than in its attempt to raise an audience. SPIRITED AWAY was only released in 154 theaters – total. Compare this with TREASURE PLANET which opened in more than 3000 theaters and an advertising budget to cover more than the cost of SPIRITED AWAY's production.

THE CHUBB CHUBBS was a short made by the newly constructed SONY cgi studio while they were waiting to get their computers going on STUART LITTLE II. In a couple of months hundreds of people labored to push out this short and did a nice slick job of it. Every move, every joke, every voice, every note of music is predictable. Once they earmarked the film for awards, they generated articles in the likes of the LA TIMES and a number of film magazines. The target wasn't animators, it was Academy voters. Then just as the voters were voting for the award, the studio released the short – for free – on the internet. This generated more free press. It worked. The film won.

The 2D Independent short from Japan, MT. HEAD, didn't have a chance. (Though, it was a surprise that the short from Pixar – designed to accompany the DVD's of MONSTERS, INC. – didn't win. That makes two times that these monsters haven't won an Oscar.)

But despite all the politics, undoubtedly the best film won. SPIRITED AWAY got such unanimous reviews and needed a second look by the general public. And that's exactly what the Oscar brought to it. Disney reopened the film in 800 theaters this past week and actually produced a TV ad for it. Unfortunately, it also means that THE CHUBB CHUBBS will probably end up as an animated feature or series for TV. Well, I guess, at least, some cgi animators will get work out of it. Wonder of wonders these Oscars.



Just in case anyone was holding it for safe-keeping-- Candy Kugel lost her black hat with a pounded bronze bee pin on it (you can keep the hat, it's the pin she'd like back for sentimental reasons...) at the Tissa David retrospective at the Gramercy Theater last January. It wasn't back at her seat that night and no one returned it to the box office subsequently, so she was hoping someone might have picked it up and will return it for her everlasting gratitude. That or "...nothing at all." contact:

Candy Kugel

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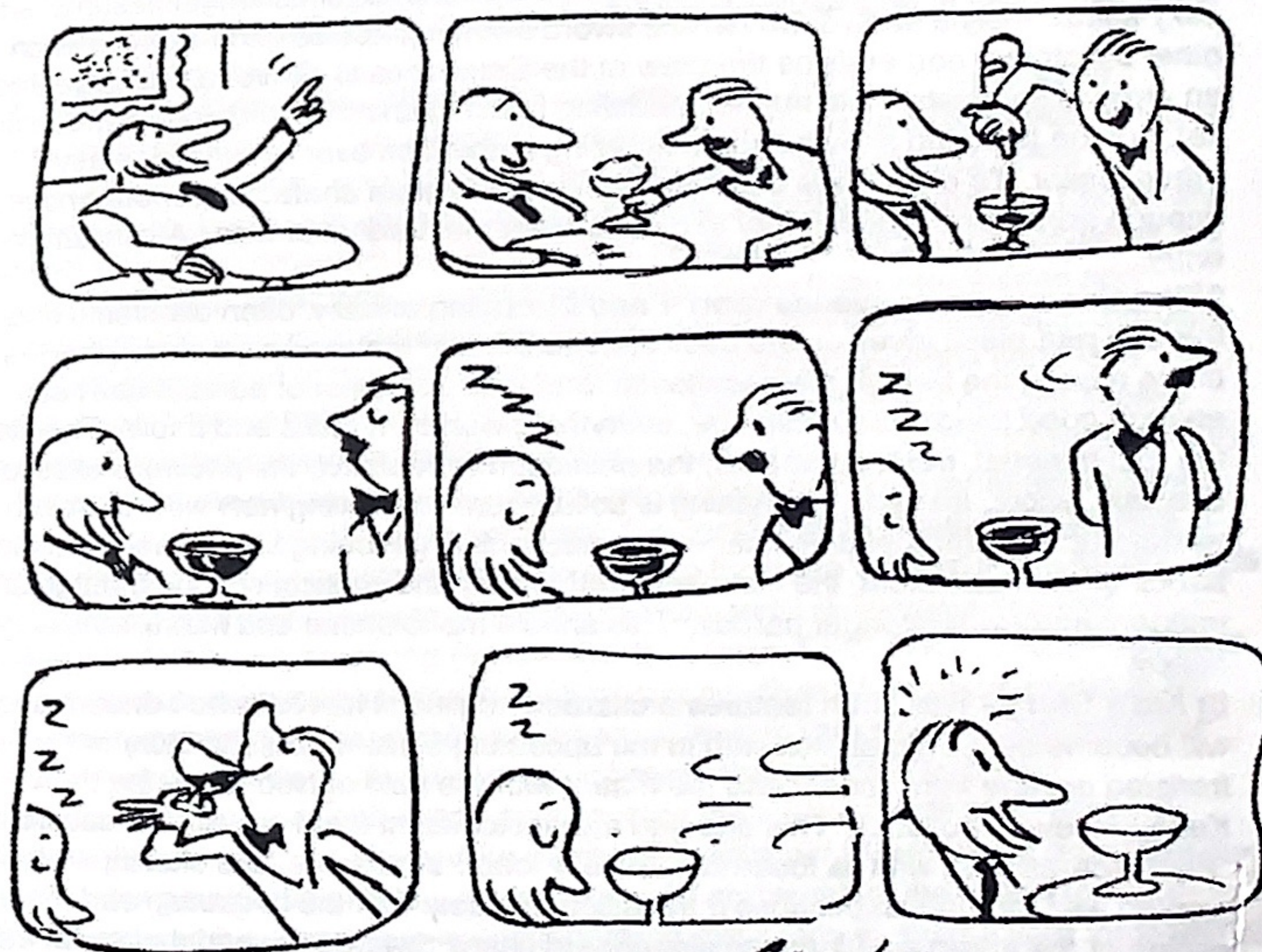
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Beckerman

How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Robots

by Trevor Woolley

It's rare for a live-action blockbuster to be translated into competent, animated form. One needs only to call up images of the animated versions of *Evolution*, *The Mummy*, and *Ghostbusters* (OK, *Ghostbusters* was pretty rad) to understand that, more often than not, animating popular culture usually involves dumbing down the material, hacking up the dialog, and adding a goofy sidekick or two. Not the case with Warner Brothers, *The Animatrix*. Technically it's not an animated version of the film, but a series of bookends and conversation pieces designed to flesh out the world of the Matrix and add a little new flavor to an already very healthy franchise. On June 3rd Warner Brothers will release a VHS and DVD version of this set which includes nine animated shorts ranging from six to seventeen minutes long, audio commentary, and "making-of" documentary. They are written and produced by some of the hottest names in Anime, and are as slick and well produced as their legacies suggest. So if you're a fan of swords, and robots, and wave after wave of animated girls in their panties that you're after, then pop that red pill and step through the looking glass into the world of the *Animatrix*. To check out these films and learn more about this project, check out www.theanimatrix.com.

1) Final Flight of the Osiris - Animated by Square USA, Inc. and a couple of the heavy hitters that brought you "Final Fantasy: The Spirits Within", this sexy precursor to "The Matrix Reloaded" runs with its heart in its throat. Smooth and stylish enough to have made the feature, it packs a surprising amount of drama for its length. It starts with a sexy samurai-style showdown (where sword swinging hotties chop away at each other's clothing) and ends as the crew of the Osiris tries to deliver a message through an army of sentinels. The human modeling (sans clothing) isn't completely convincing, yet, but the texturing showed some amazing innovation over its Final Fantasy predecessor. It's a very well done piece with some great character performances and enough adrenaline induced fury to please even the hardest of fans. A very striking entry.

2) The Second Renaissance (part 1 and 2) - Using uneasy, often disturbing imagery, this two part piece gives us the back story to the first Matrix film. It chronicles the rise of the robots, the birth of their sentience, and their conquest of earth. I can't say enough good things about this one, everything works. It rocks and it rolls. The story is fun (old material, fresh approach), the animation is beautiful, the pacing is excellent, direction, score, imagery, everything is solid. From the chilling new view of trench warfare, to the unforgettable image of a mechanical girl being torn to pieces at the hands of demonstrators, the film offers both social and political critique through strong imagery and even stronger parody. This should make anime and Matrix fans very, very happy.

3) Kid's Story - This short features a character called "The Kid" who I understand we will become better acquainted with in the upcoming films. It tells the story of his frenzied escape from school and the matrix with the help of Neo (featuring the voice of Keanu Reeves, no less). This one had a great look to it that I can almost describe as "Plympton-esque", with its loose line, initially long frame holds, and sketchpad feel. It worked well for the film because it transitioned nicely with the beginning and made the pacing of the adrenaline-induced skateboard chase towards the end that much more distinct and effective. You'll leave this one wholly impressed and out of breath.

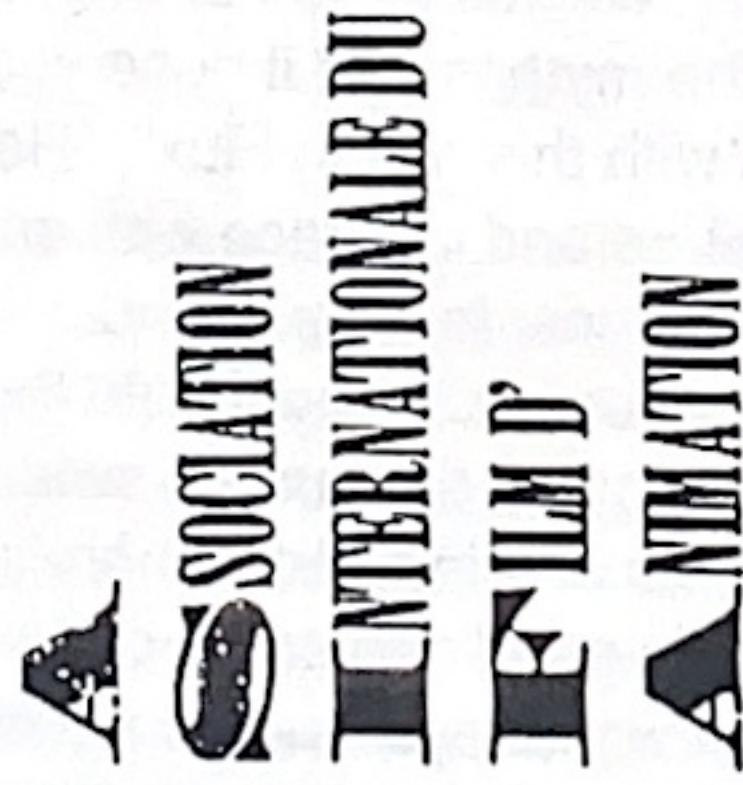
4) The Program - Arguably the most "anime" of the lot, arguably the worst script. There's plenty of samurai action among bamboo fields and pagodas here as the two main characters discuss returning to the matrix over swordplay in the simulator. I don't have much to say about this one, it is what it is. Anime fans will get a kick out of it, but aside from its breathtaking opening, and beautiful directorial perspectives, there wasn't a lot of innovation or tremendous story telling. In my humble opinion, it's the weakest link in the chain. It just felt too much like the director's previous work on "Ninja Scroll" and "Vampire Hunter D" to get my blood boiling.

5) World Record - I was really impressed with this film's bold direction. Between its perspective play, spastic keyframes, and extremely exaggerated poses, the movement of these characters will leave you somewhere between awe and vertigo. It's like watching silly putty dance across a newspaper page, but the end result is inspiring. Essentially it's a tale of rehabilitation and escape as a runner experiences euphoria during a big race and achieves true consciousness. Unfortunately, even as he is seeing his reality for what it is, his over exertion in the race leads to a break down of his body in the Matrix. There's a lot to like here, but if you really want to walk away with something, come for a quick lesson in short-format tension building. This film excels at making you squirm.

6) Beyond - Simply put, beautiful. This piece honestly has some of the most beautiful backgrounds I've ever seen in an animated film. It tells the story of a group of kids checking out a haunted house that turns out to be a malfunctioning grid of the Matrix. As the laws of physics and reality break down, the matrix men appear to right the wrong and chase off the children. The story was really innovative and the characters were surprisingly developed for such a short piece, so it's no surprise that this short offered the most heart and humanity of the lot. I thought the kids were charming as they exploited gravity and time with their games, and there was something inherently good about using the Matrix to initiate a bit of magic into some otherwise ordinary lives.

7) A Detective Story - This classic film noir piece by Cowboy bebop director Shinichiro Watanabe, was an anomaly. It was one of the more timid entries in terms of its content, but it also sported one of the boldest aesthetics in the series. Its photo-realistic, black and white backgrounds were stylistically stunning. Combining the feel of a charcoal sketch and a newsprint photo, these backdrops served as the perfect setting for a hardboiled undercover romp where rotary telephones and typewriters met laptops and morphing Matrix agents. The story deals with a private detective being hired to hunt the illusive Trinity, but to be honest the story isn't anything we haven't seen before. What it gains with its two-fisted rhetoric it loses with its cliché detective conventions. In that respect it ties with "The Program" for the worst script in the series, but at least this one is trying to slap a genre around and manages to never take itself too seriously. The most notable aspect of the piece is that it explores the possibility of multiple realities for those trapped in the Matrix. This was a really interesting expansion on the mythos and it deserves a firm nod.

8) Matriculated - Peter Chung returns with this "Aeon Flux", "Heavy Metal" hybrid in which a group of liberated humans capture and interface with enemy robots in an effort to turn them to their cause. Its strongest feature (besides its premise) is its fascinating design work. As the narrative breaks through into the Matrix environment, the color and shape play become the surreal swirls of an acid trip dream. Before that, the shrimp-like robots and industrial shoreline will drop your jaw. Although it gets a little preachy for its own good and some of the characters are functionally ambiguous, there is enough visual eye candy to ensure your forgiveness. Dancing back and forth between metaphorical visuals and whimsical homage, this is the one that will keep you puzzling after the credits role.



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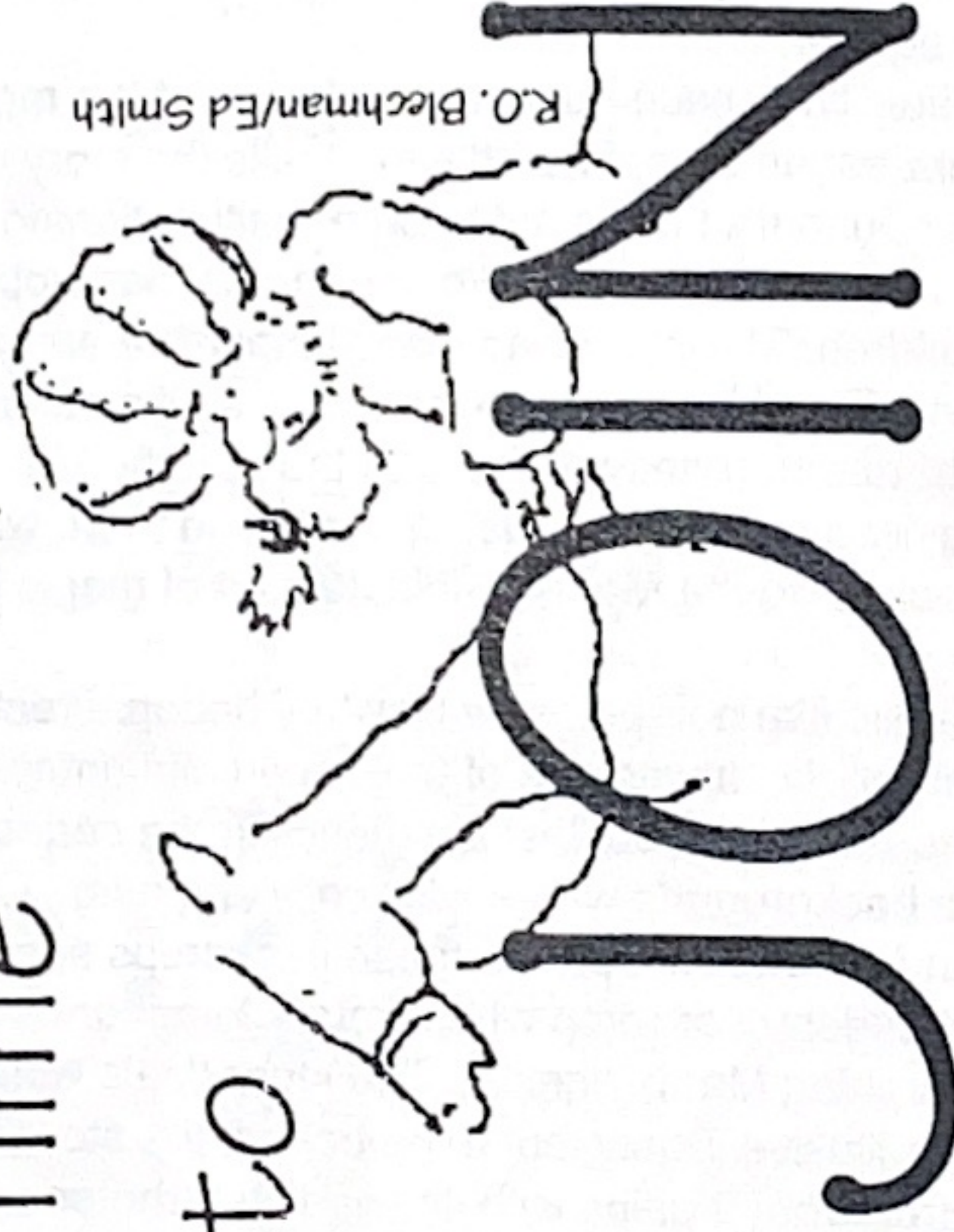
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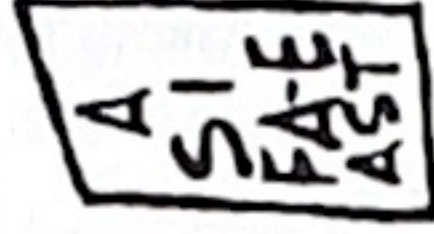
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Freshman Year: The students of Clone High USA

by Richard Gorey

There's been a lot of press lately about the new MTV animated series Clone High USA- mostly regarding the controversy the series has generated for its depiction of a high school version of the assassinated Mohandes Gandhi. I wonder if some people would have commented on the show at all, had it not been for the controversy: animation traditionally commands little space in the popular press. Some of you may be familiar with the story of how 150 politicians and activists in India protested the new MTV show, and how the at-first dismissive network eventually caved to complaints and issued an apology to the people of India. Bowing to increasing pressure, MTV also pulled a website dedicated to the show's characters- a kind of yearbook featuring the Gandhi character. Though the show has a loyal and vocal fan base, the criticism may have hurt its shot at renewal: recently Clone High was put on temporary hiatus. Let's hope we all get to see what happens to the students in their freshman year: the show deserves a chance at success. After I watched a few episodes, I could see why there had been talk: the series is sharp, irreverent, and sometimes intentionally shocking in its depiction of a group of angst-ridden teens who just happen to have been cloned from the DNA of dead (often dramatically dead) historical figures. I wasn't sure what to expect during my chat with the show's creators, Chris Miller and Phil Lord. I was quite pleasantly surprised to discover they were very forthcoming, friendly, and best of all, very intelligent speakers, proud of their work on the series and very sensitive to the peculiar problems and hurdles inherent in creating animation for television. What fascinated me about the story of Clone High wasn't the flap about the Gandhi character at all. More intriguing to me- as an animator- was the story of how these two young men got their show produced professionally and aired on MTV, considering the weak economy and the atmosphere of "political correctness" that's swept the nation. Many ASIFA members, I'm guessing, have ambitions to do an animated series of their own someday. I thought readers of the newsletter would be



more interested in the process by which an animated series goes from an idea to a reality than in the story behind the controversy (easily accessible on the internet anyway). Accordingly, I tailored my talk with the show's creators to a discussion of the journey they took in getting their series off the ground. Whatever one thinks (or doesn't think) of the series, it's always inspirational to hear someone share the details of their success. Chris Miller and Phil Lord reminded me a lot of some of the people I'm meeting at ASIFA: they're bright, funny, enthusiastic, and talented. The difference between them and us is that they've just gotten ten million dollars from MTV to create their own cartoon. How did that happen? Well, they told me.

Chris and Phil (now in their late twenties) first met while students at Dartmouth College, in David Ehrlich's animation class. There- they claimed- it was mostly due to Ehrlich's enthusiasm and guidance that the pair even considered animation as a vocation. "He was the first person who told us, 'You can earn a living doing this- that you could make a career out of animation'", Chris recalls. Both Chris and Phil cite Ehrlich's positive attitude and dedication to them as a strong influence. "He'd call you at home if you were late for class", Phil remembers, "and say 'get in here!'" None of my animation teachers ever called me at home. Maybe if they had, I'd have a series at MTV, too. I wonder how many animators out there reading this can relate to Chris' recollection that the "film department" at Dartmouth consisted mainly of the energetic Ehrlich and "a Bolex on a tripod taped to the floor" on which all student animation was shot. "It was primitive, but it helped us understand that the technical aspects of animation are very simple. It's basically just a lot of drawings...it's a very direct process of filmmaking," Chris says. This simple and unassuming approach to the mechanics of animation led Chris and Phil to create a few early films which ran at ASIFA, and, by contemporary accounts, these were well received. The success of these early efforts led to a meeting with Linda Simensky, who offered advice and encouragement, and (for Chris) an internship at the studio of Bill Plympton. I'm guessing these experiences are ones to which many ASIFA members can relate: several people I've met have worked with Plympton, and we've all met and liked Linda. The theme that seems to run through Miller and Lord's experience so far is the presence of mentors. Both animators cite the influence of professionals they admired as galvanizing forces in their careers.

Chris and Phil took their ambitions to another level when they used their early successes to apply for jobs at the Disney television studios, where they spent a brief time pitching series, but "It wasn't the right place for us, in retrospect," Chris says. The pair had been influenced by the work of Matt Groening, John Kricfalusi, and ribald series like "South Park": when they decided to create a series of their own, they knew it would be something irreverent and edgy, not gentle and childlike. Like many of their generation, Phil and Chris were raised on animation quite unlike the Disney Classics: shows like The Simpsons and Ren and Stimpy. They learned from those shows to deliver humor and sometimes satire, but in Clone High, there's an emotional complexity that is uniquely their own. Yes, Clone High is sarcastic and very "Gen-X", but what really distinguishes the show (to my way of thinking) is the confusion, humiliation, and emotional upheavals of its characters. One doesn't get the feeling, for instance, that Mike Judge was especially fond of Beavis and Butthead, but Chris and Phil seem to have genuine pity and affection for the characters of Clone High: the series reminds one of its live-action counterpart, Dawson's Creek, in some important particulars. (In one episode, the students of Clone High even had a film festival like the Dawson's Creek kids. I liked the Clone High festival better.)

Though the series skewers the historical aspects of its characters- and is humor driven- it also spends much of its length exploring the insecurities and psychological turmoil of its teen protagonists. Despite a fantastic premise, the show's interactions are often grounded in emotional reality to such an extent that I wondered why Chris and Phil didn't just pitch the series as a live action product. "It's harder- though you wouldn't think it- to pitch live action," they claim. "The networks don't understand animation, and in a way, you can hide behind the mystique of the process," Chris says, laughing. "When anyone asks you a question about how long it will take or what's going on, you can say 'Well, animation's complicated. It takes a long time,' and they'll leave you alone, because they don't understand how it works, really." Still, creating a pilot film with someone else's money must be a daunting and intimidating experience. At first, the idea was pitched to the Fox network- no doubt owing to the success of their long-running Simpsons series. Chris and Phil recall then Fox president Doug Herzog approving an initial pilot film and giving Lord and Miller the go-ahead (and money) to make their first episode.

"It was great," Chris says. "Exhilarating. But unnerving, too." The pair says the experience of having the money and facilities to produce a film on a large scale was one of the biggest thrills of their early careers, but, unfortunately, things at Fox didn't unfold according to their expectations. A regime change found Herzog out and Chris and Phil with a glossy, slick, professional-looking pilot film that would likely never see prime time. It was a real coup to have their film created on the Fox network's dime, but this reel was about all the team got from their experience. The next step was MTV. Chris and Phil were able to pitch the idea for their series there, and now had the added advantage of the finished first episode to present at pitch sessions. Of course, this sample reel made the idea seem more tangible than a simple storyboard might have. In retrospect, MTV seems a better home for the Clone High series: even the irreverent Fox network may not have had the reputation for chance-taking and button pushing MTV enjoys (some would say "wallows in"). After all, MTV is the network that introduced Beavis and Butthead and Jackass to the nation: it's unlikely they would have balked at the more controversial aspects of Clone High. Oddly, the more shocking aspects of the show were not the guiding factor in its creation.

Though the series often crosses the line in terms of humor and character, what drew Chris and Phil to the subject were their own troubled high school careers. Phil Lord recalls experiences with bullies in his teen years as one of the factors that led him to set the show in that arena. How far, in the end, is Clone High from the angst and turmoil at places like Columbine? And why hasn't anyone else noticed this? For all the talk of the Gandhi character, Clone High is much more noteworthy for tackling the conflicts and pressures that create killer teens like Dylan Kliebold. If the series presents a view of High School as hell, then it's arguably no different that the real life hell that produces the kind of monstrous teens Stephen King wrote about in books like Carrie. In a way, Clone High is the animated equivalent to horror films like Carrie and Halloween, which at their core are about all the terrible trouble kids can get into...when left to their own devices.

In this light, the show's anger and emotional intensity resonate on deeper levels. What is anger, after all, but a reaction to unhappiness? If Clone High is sometimes shocking and painful to watch, it also accurately reflects the savage climate of high school, which writer Jesse Horstings once described as "a psychological Cuisinart." Dropping revered figures from history smack in the middle of a torture chamber most viewers remember with a mixture of pain and embarrassment is a clever and audacious idea. Can the average person really relate to Gandhi, or President



Kennedy- who, among others like Cleopatra and Joan of Arc- have been lionized beyond all recognition? We may admire them, we may dislike them, we may be fascinated with them as historical figures, but Clone High encourages us to IDENTIFY with them. This strikes me as the series' greatest achievement. Reinventing Cleopatra as the class vamp, and Kennedy as the epitome of the arrogant teenage seducer may push some people's buttons, but one has to admit, it brings these much-discussed and misunderstood characters into a forum in which they are recognizable and accessible. We've all shared the experience of high school, even if most of us have never been Queen of the Nile or President of the United States. Though I understand the negative reaction to the Gandhi character, I don't think Phil and Chris' intention was to offend. I believe they saw an opportunity to explore the turmoil of high school in a way that to them was potent and unexpected. MTV agreed.

So what's it like- having made a successful pitch- to actually produce a series? Many of us would like to have just such problems, and Chris and Phil were frank about the pressures and the unique obstacles inherent in the process. First of all, the success of the pitch involved a move to LA, where the boys conceptualize and write the episodes. "You know, you're taught to hate LA," Chris says, laughing. "But now we like it, we really do." Phil agrees. "It's like Manhattan, but squished." Besides having to have a car to get around, the team found just what they needed in LA: the talent to create the specialized voices for their characters. "I'd advise anyone who's trying to create a soundtrack for animation to get to know the people in improvisational comedy," Chris says. Miller and Lord had their pick of several talented performers, among them Will Forte from Saturday Night Live, Bill Lawrence, and Neil Flynn (from Scrubs). Some cast members volunteered to do voices on spec while the show was in development. Chris and Phil speak respectfully and gratefully of the talented cast they assembled. "They brought something to the characters that wasn't there when the show was conceptualized and written. Originally, our character of Joan (of Arc) was really dark, and heavy. We envisioned her as something like the voice of Daria (MTV's character) but Nicole Sullivan, the actress who does her voice in the series, brought something funnier and more lively to it. [A voice like that] helps you to bring the writing up to that

level, after you've heard it." Most of the voice actors- with their background in sketch comedy- were able to alter the tone and character of their voices in a way that traditional actors might not have the facility to do. "Most of them had never done animation before," Phil says. "And it was fun for them to see the finished episodes."

For Miller and Lord as well, sometimes: the series is animated in Korea, designed and written in LA, and storyboarded in Canada, by the folks at Nelvana animation. "Does this scattered production process translate into the finished product?" "Sometimes it's weird," Chris says. "You never know how someone in Korea is going to interpret your storyboards." Sometimes, as much as "thirty to forty percent" of what appears on the screen is visually different from what Chris and Phil had in mind when they storyboarded. Is this a problem? "Sometimes, yeah", they say. "Other times, it's like 'wow'. You didn't think to present an action or a gesture that way, and the animators bring something new and fresh to it, so it's not always a bad thing." The series is perhaps less prone to this kind of reinterpretation because of its specific character designs. "A lot of animation currently running is designed for shorter figures," Chris says. "The Powerpuff girls, for instance, are, like two or three heads high. The characters on Clone High are taller, about five heads high. We felt that to design them more squat and stylized would keep audiences from identifying with them. We wanted a look that would be more representational." Miller and Lord cite the influence of designer Cary Yost, of Samurai Jack, in giving the characters and the show itself its polished appearance. "They each have a distinctive look, and the tall design makes it easier for the characters to express emotion," Lord says. Aside from the more realistic character design, color design and control on the series is quite impressive. Clone High's look, like its characters and theme, is something apart.

I asked Chris and Phil if they minded the loss of control that always accompanies departmentalization of an animated series. They seemed cheerfully resigned to the situation. In a way, they say, seeing the episodes for the first time is a revelation to them, and they occasionally pinch themselves when they think of the high profile the series has won. As it turned out, instead of shopping the series to animation companies themselves, Miller and Lord were approached by Nelvana early on, and they were glad of the partnership. Though the series is currently in production in three countries, the work seems to be progressing smoothly, but like any expensive animated venture, the future of the show is not a certainty. Though the ratings have been impressive, and the show has a high profile among MTV viewers, it's not yet the kind of phenomenon that Jackass is, for instance. Recently, the series was put on hiatus, and fans eager to see episodes 9 through 13 have been chomping at the bit to see the remaining shows of season one. The show's rabid fan base is quite loyal, but for now, at least, the future of the kids at Clone High seems up in the air. Will MTV behind the series, and renew Clone High? "They're committed to it," Lord says. "But they're at a crossroads at MTV." It's been hard to generate the rating and the press for the reality series that are currently the rage on television. Something like The Real World or Anna Nicole, or any number of live action series can be marketed by their stars: new episodes can be created with less of the elaborate planning and production necessary for an animated series like Clone High. Still, the initial success of Clone High, USA is a remarkable thing in the current economical environment, and considering the odds against animation of any kind these days. With studios like Disney laying off staff and cutting salaries- and the rocky road faced by even the omnipresent Cartoon Network, Chris and Phil's odd, oddly touching little comedy series as an inspiration for independent animators looking for the same kind of success. So what are the future plans for the creators of Clone High USA? Features? Another series? "For now, it's still too early to make those kinds of plans," Phil says, and Chris adds, with a good-natured laugh, "We want Clone High to take over the world!"



ASIFA EAST PRESENTS: An Evening with SNL's Robert Smigel

Monday April 21st, 6:30 PM.
SVA 209 E 23rd St. (btwn 2nd &
3rd Ave)
Room 502 (fifth floor)



SNL Saturday Evening Funhouse
Animation will be screened and discussed
by creator/writer Robert Smigel and
special guests, animators' Robert
Marianetti and David Wachtenhiem

Robert Smigel, the man behind the wildly popular Saturday Night Live filmed shorts (The Ambiguously Gay Duo, Fun With Real Audio, X-Presidents), lends his voice for Beefy the bulldog.

Smigel grew up in Manhattan and struggled as a pre-dental student at Cornell and NYU. After moving to Chicago to study with The Players Workshop of the Second City, Smigel performed sketch comedy on stage and was hired by Al Franken and Tom Davis as a writer for Saturday Night Live in 1985. He wrote for the show from 1985-1993, creating such memorable sketches as Da Super Fans, Schmitts Gay Beer and William Shatner's Trekkies convention. He went on to become the original head writer and producer of Late Night with Conan O'Brien where he still plays Triumph, The Insult Comic Dog and the mouth of President Clinton, Don King, Jesse Ventura and many others.

In 1996, Smigel was the executive producer of Dana Carvey's controversial ABC prime time sketch show, where he created The Ambiguously Gay Duo, leading to his return to Saturday Night Live as writer/producer of TV Funhouse cartoons. Working with such animation studios as J.J. Sedelmaier, Wachtenhiem/Marianetti, and Tape House Toons, Smigel's cartoons have been honored at numerous festivals. Smigel won an Emmy for his writing at SNL in 1989 and in 1998 received, along with Monty Python animator Terry Gilliam, the Dallas Video Festival's Ernie Kovacs Award for innovative contributions to television.

Most recently, Smigel has been named creator and executive producer of COMEDY CENTRAL's TV Funhouse, an innovative series that combines animation with puppets and real animals, in addition, he has written a book for Random House titled X-Presidents.



Orlando, Florida animation production house, **A&S Animation, Inc.**, has signed an agreement with Dargaud-Marina in Paris for the French company to produce 26, seven minute episodes of the Florida created series, **Timmy's Lessons In Nature**.

Mark Simon, owner of A&S Animation, Inc., along with local animator T.J., created a truly moronic character, Timmy, over two years ago. "Timmy never learns," says Simon. "He unwittingly demonstrates, with one disaster after another, basic wild-life survival rules."

The original animated shorts produced by A&S Animation star only Timmy and his animal foils. During series development to turn Timmy into a longer series, A&S added more characters, while keeping the same physical humor. The longer series was titled **The Troop**. "We surrounded Timmy with an idiotic troop of Boy Rangers who brave Mother Nature, as well as survive a nasty back-woods threesome and endure humiliation by the beyond-perfect Girl Rangers," Simon adds.

While still in production on the first three shorts, Spike Decker, of the famed Spike & Mike's Sick & Twisted Festival of Animation, saw the first short. "We got a call from Spike saying, 'We'll take as many of these as you can produce by May'," says Simon. "Spike loved the irreverence and the directness of it."

Three episodes of **Timmy's Lessons In Nature** toured movie theaters in the US and Canada through 2001 and 2002 in the 2002 edition of the Sick & Twisted festival. The one minute long shorts also won 14 international awards, including a Telly, Gold at Worldfest Houston and Excellence in Writing from the ASIFA-East Animation Awards, the international association of animators.

Simon presented the Lessons shorts along with their Troop concept to Muriel Achery of Dargaud-Marina at MIP-TV. MIP is the international television sales event held each year in Cannes, France. "Muriel laughed out loud at our shorts," says Simon proudly. The companies worked together on further development of the concept after the event.

Another recent use of the Lessons shorts is within Simon's latest book, **Producing Independent 2D Character Animation**. Simon's book, published by Focal Press, teaches every step of animation production using one of his award-winning shorts as an example. The book includes a CD-Rom which features a special edition of Lesson 3 as well as other animation samples and software demos shown in the text.

The series will be produced in France by Dargaud-Marina's in-house animation facility. Dargaud-Marina is the first French animation production company to break into the US syndication market in 1997 with **The Mister Men**.

A&S Animation is a production and development company specializing in character animation for TV, commercials, training videos and the web. *For more information, contact: Mark Simon mark@FunnyToons.tv www.FunnyToons.tv*

Cowboy Bebop, The Movie

by Trevor Woolley



The gangs all here as Fay, Spike, Edward, Jet, and Ein embark on another intergalactic bounty hunt across the quadrant. Being a fan of the series, I understand why people are drawn to the stylish exploits of the Bebop crew. There's a hot score, beautiful animation, clever stories, and the directing is some of the smartest stuff out there. Unfortunately all is not present and accounted for as the series transitions into the realm of the feature. The directing is still smart as a whip and the action remains swift and brutal, but the balance of other elements seems to be a bit askew. The best way I can put it is to say that it falls victim to Star Trek syndrome where sometimes the movie can feel like a long episode, or worse yet, sometimes you see episodes better than the movie.

The plot revolves around the crew tracking down a bio-terrorist who is reeking havoc in a major metropolitan area. It's an incredibly relevant theme (maybe too much so), and one that is handled with every bit of the brutality and consequence you'd expect to see on the six o'clock news. It's heavier on the music and the laughs this time, heavier on the atmosphere, too heavy on the cowboy theme, and, unfortunately, lighter on the charm. Its biggest problem is that it suffers from taking itself too seriously as it trips on its own coolness and the "what is life anyway" philosophy that permeates the whole film. Long philosophical rants meander off into fits of mental masturbation as the characters reevaluate time and time again their relationship to the universe and each other. The other sticking point is the film's tendencies to follow clues we never received. On several occasions the characters suddenly show up with a hot new tip, piece of equipment, or lead which we never quite learn the origin of.

Now having said all that, there's a lot of stuff here that fans of the series are going to love. The movie is generous with those onscreen punches you can feel in your seat, and the devil may care attitude of the crew. There's some rather witty inside jokes for the true fans, and some major character development on almost all of the leads. You'll have to catch your breath a couple of times, and even though the dialogue is decidedly anime, I think most folks will find a laugh or two among the dub. All in All I have to say it's worth a look, even if you're not a fan of the series the lesson in style is worth the trip alone.

ASIFA EAST

c/o Michael Sporn Animation, Inc.
35 Bedford Street
NYC, NY 10014

**Saturday, April 26
The Laughing Squid SF/NY Arts Festival at CB's Gallery 313
Bowery**

212/ 677-0455
Capacity is limited, and it will sell out early - it's a good idea to
get tickets at <http://www.laughingsquid.org/nyc/>
Tickets \$10:00

We will be screening different animation both sets. New York animators will include John Dilworth, Jimmy Picker, Bill Plympton, Signe Baumann, Nina Paley, Joe Davis, Cindy Levine, and Jane Aaron. West Coast animators will include Sara Petty, Brooke Keesling, Drew King, Maria Vasilkovsky, and Kathleen Lolly among others.

Tuesday, April 29 7:30 P.M. at the Museum of Cartoon Art
32 Union Square East
Suite 600
212/254-3511

Come to a reception to welcome Nik Phelps and The Sprocket Ensemble to New York City
Refreshments with a short performance by Nik

